



Henry W. Longfellow, Abolitionist



H.W. Longfellow,  
by Samuel Lawrence, 1854

Public Poet,  
Private Abolitionist

After publishing *Poems on Slavery* in 1842, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) supported Senator Charles Sumner’s legislative efforts to end slavery, communicated with like-minded friends and colleagues through his correspondence, clubs, and other social gatherings, and used his growing influence and financial resources to quietly assist abolitionists and slaves seeking freedom. Richard Henry Dana, Jr., Charles Sumner, James Russell Lowell, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, Susan Hillard, Lunsford Lane, Josiah Henson, and others shared Longfellow’s anguish about ending slavery in the United States.

Henry Wadsworth  
Longfellow and the  
Anti-slavery Movement

Longfellow constantly encouraged his abolitionist friends’ efforts in both private and public spheres. One of his closest friends, U.S. Senator from Massachusetts Charles Sumner, forwarded the anti-slavery agenda through to the Emancipation Proclamation. When in Massachusetts, Sumner was the Longfellows’ most frequent visitor for 35 years. After pro-slavery Representative Preston Brooks beat him nearly to death on the Senate floor in 1856, Longfellow assisted him throughout his long and painful recovery.

Alice Longfellow  
Recalls the Anti-Slavery  
Efforts of Charles  
Sumner and Henry W.  
Longfellow

“Sumner was perhaps the oldest and nearest of ...[father’s friends]...their mutual fondness for literature and art drew them together in the beginning and then their intense hatred of slavery and their belief and interest in the cause of abolition...All through his public life, Mr. Sumner wrote constantly to my father, sharing with him all his cares and perplexities receiving in reply most heartfelt sympathy and advice.

There was always a sense that Mr. Sumner might have a fugitive slave somewhere about him, and a mulatto girl, whom he befriended and brought to see us, was an object of tremendous interest...”

**Journal Entries, H. W. Longfellow**  
**October 27, 1850** “*Sumner at dinner. The Fugitive Slave, Craft, has got a warrant against his pursuers, and had them arrested for slander in calling him a thief, the damages laid at ten thousand dollars. They found bail. This is a good beginning. I hear they will be drummed out of town.*”

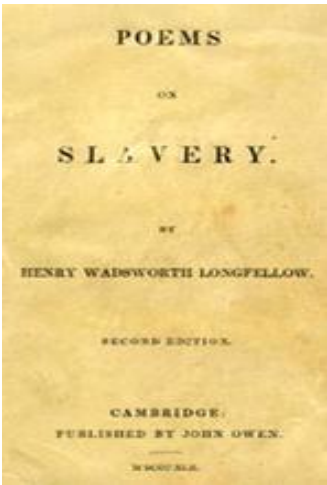
**April 4, 1851** “*There is much excitement in Boston about the capture of an alleged fugitive slave. O city without soul! When and where will this end? Shame! That the Great Republic ‘the refuge of the oppressed,’ should stoop so low as to become the Hunter of Slaves.*”

**June 2, 1854** “*The fugitive slave is surrendered to his master, and, being marched through State Street with soldiery, put on board the United States revenue cutter. Dirty work for a country that is so loud about freedom as ours!*”

**June 26, 1846**  
“*...Mr. Henson, a Negro, once a slave, now a preacher, called to get subscription for the school at Dawn, in Upper Canada, for education of blacks. I had a long talk with him, and he gave me an account of his escape from slavery with his family. .... Not one word of abuse... ”.*

**Letter, May 8, 1862**  
“*I saw lately, at a jewelers, a slave’s collar of iron, with an iron tongue as large as a spoon, to go into the mouth. Every drop of blood in me quivered !”*

Anti-Slavery Poetry



Inspired by the work of German poet Ferdinand Freilegrath, and English novelist and social critic Charles Dickens, Longfellow published *Poems on Slavery* in 1842 and later contributed poems to the abolitionist fundraiser *The Liberty Bell*. His efforts to end slavery included constant encouragement to friends taking public and dangerous stands as well as financial support for the Underground Railroad, to buy slaves their freedom, and to provide support and education for freed slaves.

*“In dark fens of the Dismal Swamp the hunted negro lay;  
He saw the fire of the midnight camp  
And heard at times a horse’s tramp  
And a bloodhound’s distant bay...”*

“The Slave in the Dismal Swamp” 1842

Financial Support

Longfellow’s financial accounts document his commitment to eliminating slavery. The poet wrote to Mrs. Wormeley on July 29, 1853: *“I am ashamed to send you so small a sum... for an emergency so great... If necessary I will double the amount, and if time presses, and donors reluctant, be kind enough to let me know...”* She replied (August 1, 1853): *“I shall free Evelina and her young children and Sarah’s husband. Three of John Gordon’s children will be left behind...”*

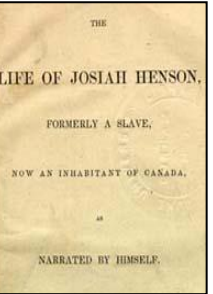
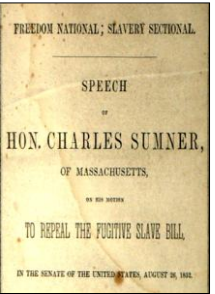
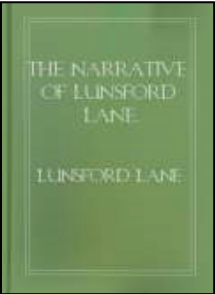
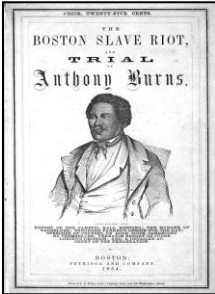
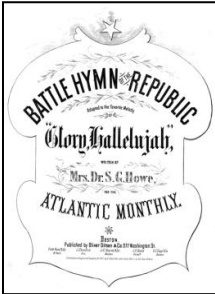
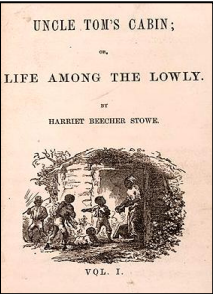
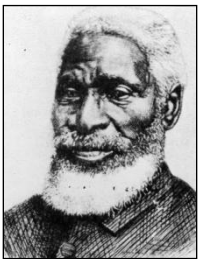
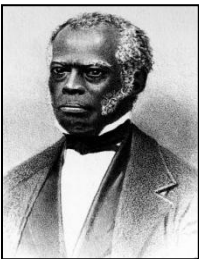
On March 22, 1857 John Wadsworth wrote to Longfellow’s sister Mary of the poet’s “splendid contribution (\$1000) to the Kansas Emigrant Aid Society,” an enormous sum in Bloody Kansas days. The 1857 donation to “Mrs. Hillard for slaves” [right] was to Susan Hillard, wife of George Stillman Hillard. She secreted slaves in their house while as federal commissioner, her husband signed orders to return fugitive slaves.

Excerpts from Longfellow’s account books:

- 1850-1856**  
African newspaper 3.00  
Mr. Still (slave) 5.00  
Miss Wormeley for Slave 10.00  
Slaves in Canada 5.00  
For “Ida May” slave 6.00  
Fugitive Slave 5.00  
Lundfort Lane [sic] 10.00  
Anti-Slavery Tract Soc. 5.00  
Mich. Negro School 15.00  
Alex Pensil for Slaves 10.00  
Loyd, the “Nubian Prince” 20.00
- 1857-1859**  
To free slave children 5.00  
Mrs. Hillard for slaves 5.00  
To free a slave 5.00  
To ransom slave 3.00  
For a Slave 2.00  
Mrs. Wells, slaves 5.00  
Two negro women 3.00
- 1860-1862**  
African Church 5.00  
For a slave 2.00  
To slave mother 1.00  
Johnson (slave) 3.50  
C.E.N. for “contrabands” 10.00

Anti-Slavery Network

Many of Longfellow’s friends and colleagues used their resources and talents as speakers, writers, and jurists to influence public opinion in the great battle to end slavery.



**The Present Crisis 1845 by James Russell Lowell [excerpt]**  
*“Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide  
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side...”*

**Journal, Henry W. Longfellow, January 1, 1863**  
*“A great day. The President’s Proclamation for Emancipation of Slaves in the rebel States, goes into effect. A beautiful day, full of sunshine, ending in a tranquil moonlight night. May it be symbolical of the Emancipation.”*